

INTERNATIONAL TRIBUNAL ON POLITICAL PRISONERS IN U.S.A. Project Components

The first public event as part of the Tribunal project was a national Symposium, held on April 28, 1990 in New York City. Endorsed by the National Lawyers Guild, National Assembly of Women Religious, War Resisters League, and forty other organizations, the Symposium was attended by 300 activists from seven cities. Documentation of the legal and political issues raised at the Symposium has been published in booklet form, as an educational tool for grassroots work on political prisoners.

An interfaith Religious Summit was convened at the American Indian Community House on July 28, 1990. Sponsored by the Interfaith Prisoners of Conscience Project, the United Board for Homeland Ministries, the National Council of Churches (NCC) Racial Justice Working Group, NCC Commission on Justice and Liberation, and Clergy and Laity Concerned (CALC), the Summit was attended by more than fifty religious leaders from various faith backgrounds. In the opening plenary, former prisoners Sr. Anne Montgomery, Dhoruba bin-Wahad, Rev. Dr. Ben Chavis, Episcopal lay person Maria Cueto, and Native American spiritualist Ted Means spoke of the connections between their faith, their political work, and their experiences in prison. A video of the plenary with a call to action from Dr. Nieves Falcon, is being produced for local church distribution, and a National Interfaith CALL to the U.S. religious community is being circulated and published, with prominent signators, to demonstrate the level of church support on these issues.

A secondary school curriculum, entitled, "Dimensions of Human Rights in the U.S.," is being developed for trial use this December, coinciding with U.N. Human Rights Day (Dec.10th). Examining human rights philosophy, the legal framework, particular issues relating to women's rights, and case studies of Puerto Rican, Native American and Black prisoners, the curriculum hopes to reach a broad spectrum of students and teachers. With assistance from consultants from the Council on InterRacial Books for Children and the NYC Board of Education Division of Curriculum, the package should be ready for final production and use by the Spring semester of 1991.

On October 24, 1990, at the N.Y. Society for Ethical Culture, a prominent grouping of literary artists from Latin America and the U.S. will participate in a reading for the prisoners. This event will seek to raise both consciousness and funds, and reach out to poets and authors concerned with the issue of human rights. During the Tribunal itself, an art exhibit will take place and a concert will be held at the time of the judges' deliberations. These events seek to further education and support within the various cultural communities.

The Tribunal itself will be held at Hunter College on December 7th through 10th, 1990. Conducted as a formal proceeding, the indictment will be presented with expert testimony and witnesses. The U.S. government will be invited to respond, and our hope is that 500 observers, including international guests and local activists, will be in attendance. A press conference will be held on December 10th in the Solarium Room of Hunter College when the judges announce their ruling.

Follow-up activity after the Tribunal includes plans for publication and distribution of the verdict, publication in book form of the entire Tribunal proceedings, and formal presentation of the verdict to various international bodies. The verdict will be presented to members of the U.S. Congress, to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, to the Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States, and to an International Human Rights Conference in Moscow in 1991.

INTERNATIONAL TRIBUNAL ON POLITICAL PRISONERS IN U.S.A.

Project Description

Representatives from more than 80 organizations, encompassing ethnically and racially diverse communities, have come together to convene a Special International Tribunal, based on the Bertrand Russell Human Rights Tribunals, of judges from Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and Europe. These judges will hear arguments of more than 100 prisoners in U.S. jails who claim to be prisoners of conscience, political prisoners, and prisoners of war, as well as supporting evidence from more than 140 individual petitioners from the legal, religious, and political communities. The work of the project is to: develop an operational definition of the term, "political prisoner," in the U.S. context; develop educational activities - such as a symposium, religious summit, literary reading, and curriculum; convene the Tribunal itself; and carry out international and U.S.-based pressure activities following the Tribunal, to insure an end to human rights abuses and amnesty for the prisoners.

A team of lawyers, case workers, and experts in prisoners' rights investigated the conditions and terms of imprisonment. For more than a year, various groups interested in human rights have been collecting information and documentation of these conditions, and the resulting evidence has been drawn together in an "indictment," which covers issues of arbitrary arrest, detention and imprisonment; preventative detention and political internment through the grand jury; denial of a fair trial; cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment, including physical and psychological torture, sexual abuse and racism. The indictment is based on denial of human rights to groups primarily defined by race, nationality and class, and examines the cases of the prisoners in the context of human rights violations against political movements, particularly those for self-determination by people of color.

One of the most important and unique aspects of this project is the multi-racial nature of its constituents, as it brings together leaders from the Black liberation, Puerto Rican independence, Native American sovereignty, and Plowshares/peace movements. We work together, despite official U.S. denial that there are any political prisoners here, because we believe that it is a primary responsibility to promote human rights - not just at an international level - but within the U.S.A. Rev. Dr. Benjamin Chavis of the United Church of Christ Commission on Racial Justice, stated clearly at the Religious Summit that "defending political prisoners is not about defending the individuals in jail, but about defending the political movements in which we work." The work of the Tribunal project is to provide materials to be used in each of our communities, to create stronger advocacy for adherence to the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, and stronger support for progressive political movements so as to more successfully guard against possible repression.

The project takes on a particular relevance at this time, as human rights issues in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union have come to such widespread attention. Also, with the release of South African political prisoner, Nelson Mandela, the general issues of political imprisonment and repression have come to the fore. Exposure of the illegalities of the U.S. Counter Intelligence Program make this project particularly timely, as evidenced by the release last Spring, on grounds of prosecutorial misconduct, of former Black Panther activist Dhoruba bin-Wahad, who spent nearly 19 years in jail for a crime he did not commit. With substantial plans for celebration of the 500th anniversary of Columbus (in 1992), the plight of Native American prisoners such as Leonard Peltier, take on strategic importance.